

Medical marijuana still a burning issue

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Proposal C would legalize use when recommended by a physician

News Staff Reporter

Ann Arbor resident Sally Maksimov plans to vote for the city's medical marijuana proposal.

Her own experiences with damaging side effects and few results from medicines for her spinal cord injury led her to believe medical marijuana is a viable option.

But resident David L. Thompson, who works in the substance abuse field, plans to vote against it. He sees people addicted to marijuana all the time, he said. And no material that is smoked should be considered medicine, when there are legal prescription medicines with the same active ingredients.

"Anyone who smokes, I don't care what it would be, you're going to lose any potential health benefit from smoke and damage to the lungs," he said.

Panelists on both sides of the issue argued their cases in a sometimes contentious debate Monday night, accusing their opponents of being misleading and quoting early 20th century physicians, along with Malcolm X and Jesus. The debate was televised live on Community Television Network before a studio audience.

The three panelists opposed to the medical marijuana charter amendment centered their arguments on the possible impact on children and the community, the vague language of the proposal and the fact that marijuana use remains illegal under federal and state law.

"There are too many unanswered medical questions that must be addressed before anything like proposal C is considered," said Clean Teens executive director Justin Bishop, criticizing the "absurd and ambiguous" language in the proposal.

Panelist Tim Paulding, a University of Michigan undergraduate student who has glaucoma, said he would never use marijuana to treat his condition. His prescription eye drops work well, he said.

He, Bishop and panelist Justin Williams noted federally approved drugs, including a marijuana derivative called Marinol, were proven safe and effective while raw plant material is not.

But panelists for the proposal argued it's wrong to prevent people from getting medicine they need because it's unpopular or too politicized.

Marijuana is "only dangerous if you use it when you're supposed to be studying for an exam," said Chuck Ream, who led the petition drive to put the medical marijuana question before voters.

"I think it's criminal for you to decide what kind of medicine we can take," said panelist Matthew Barber, a Traverse City resident with multiple sclerosis. "It should be between us and our doctors." Barber and Ream were joined by retired Detroit police officer Dan Solano in arguing for the proposal.

Several people in the audience of about 20 asked questions, including whether panelists would refuse medical marijuana to their own family members if there were not other options.

One person, who identified himself as a retired Ann Arbor police officer, called in to the show and said he thought it was a bad idea for the proposal to be a local issue only, because people could still easily be arrested outside the city or by federal or state officers.

Ream added that if Ann Arborites wanted to be part of Gov. Jennifer Granholm's "Cool Cities" initiative, the city must be diverse and respect the referendum process.

Bishop recoiled and said he was disturbed that Ream would invoke being cool with medical marijuana approval. That was a central problem, he said: Kids would perceive there to be less risk involved with smoking marijuana and would be more likely to seek it out.

Voters Maksimov and Thompson both think the majority of Ann Arbor's voters will side with them on Nov. 2.

What the final outcome will be is anybody's guess. But Marijuana Policy Project communications director Bruce Mirken said straight medical marijuana referenda have never failed in U.S. votes.

A 2002 statewide measure in Arizona failed, he said, but it combined a series of provisions including a general decriminalization of marijuana.

"We are pretty confident that the streak is going to continue, not just in Ann Arbor" but elsewhere as well, he said.

Experts say municipal medical marijuana referenda are relatively rare. But the issue is increasingly cropping up on state election ballots.

Today, nine states - Alaska, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Maine, Nevada, Vermont, Oregon and Washington - have laws legalizing marijuana for patients with physician recommendations. The sale or use of marijuana is still illegal under federal law.

Monday's debate was sponsored by Community Television Network and the Ann Arbor area's League of Women Voters. It will be replayed on CTN's channel 19 several times before election day; visit www.a2ctn.org or call (734) 769-7422 for details.

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